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AUTHOR	Meacham, Jack
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ABSTRACT

This questionnaire is intended to help college faculty and administrators assess the adequacy of the general education curriculum and determine the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes needed by students, and as a tool for program evaluation, innovation, and implementation. It can also be used by college and university students to assess and compare campus experiences and core curriculum issues. The questionnaire contains 28 statements descriptive of general education programs and respondents are asked to rank them vis-a-vis their schools on a scale of 1 to 5. Questions cover such areas as goals, institutional mission, student understanding, global perspectives, multiculturalism, student experience, student differences, articulation, faculty experience, faculty-student interactions, coordination, disciplinary links, faculty development, co-curricular activities, course evaluation, and quality. Appended to the report is a list of additional source material relevant to each of the questions. (CH)

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NETWORK FOR ACADEMIC RENEWAL

ASSESSING GENERAL EDUCATION

IHE030 289

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A QUESTIONNAIRE TO INITIATE CAMPUS CONVERSATIONS

BY JACK MEACHAM

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ASSESSING GENERAL EDUCATION

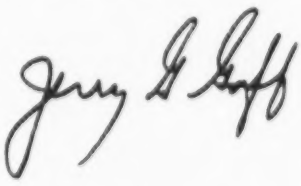
PREFACE

THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM, and general education more specifically, has been subjected to a great deal of analysis and debate in recent years. As leaders of campus assessment and improvement initiatives can attest, curricular discussions on college and university campuses often turn into fractious and contentious arguments about peripheral issues of turf, resources, and workloads. Different educational philosophies, often strongly felt and implicitly held, make it difficult for a campus to reach agreement about shared principles that should sustain its curriculum. Although there is no end of good ideas and recommended curricula, discussions often founder for lack of a sound process, a strategy to move the conversation along in a constructive and cumulative fashion.

THIS BRIEF QUESTIONNAIRE is a useful way to launch an assessment of general education. Students, faculty members, and other groups can use it as a way to reflect on their own experiences and to compare different perspectives on the core curriculum. And it can be used to launch a serious and constructive conversation about general education, one of the requisites of any successful curriculum change effort. It was developed initially by Jack Meacham for use in a workshop he was conducting to focus the conversation of faculty members on several key topics. When I saw a copy, I recognized that it had great potential for use by others. He agreed to revise and refine the document for publication.

THE QUESTIONNAIRE HAS OTHER USES than assessing a curriculum and starting a conversation. The twenty-eight categories that he identifies provide a language for talking about the curriculum. Many academics have a limited vocabulary to use in thinking about the curriculum. Some focus on goals and others on structures, some on the student experiences and others on the faculty experiences. The language of this questionnaire helps a group think more clearly—hence communicate more effectively—about curricular issues. Also, Meacham points to a series of valuable publications published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and keys specific concepts to precise passages in several works. This directs individuals to professional literature that discusses the importance of each concept. This feature may help ground discussions of the curriculum in the literature of the field and remove it from the realm of more personal, private, and passionate appeals, and thereby keep discussions moving ahead.

THE NETWORK FOR ACADEMIC RENEWAL is an activity of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. It publishes a series of practical materials to support academic change for improvement in teaching, learning, and the curriculum. This questionnaire supplements previous publications: *Talking Points* contains three exercises—a series of structured exercises, a case study of curriculum change, and a form to explore institutional supports for general education; *Current Issues in Liberal Education* contains ten brief articles on new ideas and approaches to improving undergraduate education, readings ideal for a faculty seminar or retreat. The Network for Academic Renewal also offers a series of working conferences for faculty members and academic administrators on such topics as the politics of curriculum change, sustaining vitality in general education, reforming and assessing the academic major, internationalizing the curriculum, and teaching cultural encounters. Further information about these services can be obtained by contacting AAC&U.



Jerry G. Gaff
Vice President and Director

INTRODUCTION

THIS QUESTIONNAIRE IS DESIGNED to help college and university faculty and academic administrators initiate a conversation about general education. Reflecting upon the campus's current program can be an important step toward assessing the adequacy of the curriculum and determining the knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that students ought to acquire and how to provide them in the curriculum. Faculty and administrators completing this questionnaire will reach points of agreement and disagreement about general education as well as recognize strengths and weaknesses in their current programs. An open conversation about purposes and goals, points of agreement and disagreement, and strengths and weaknesses can be an important tool for the challenging processes of curriculum assessment, innovation, and implementation.

PROCESS

DISTRIBUTE THE QUESTIONNAIRE to either a few faculty and administrators or large groups. On some campuses, it might be of interest to compare the responses from different target groups, for example, humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences faculty compared to administrators, advisors, or students. Respondents are asked to give points from one to five to indicate the extent to which twenty-eight statements descriptive of general education programs are applicable on their campuses. Responses should be anonymous with respondents writing their answers on the questionnaire or on copies of the blank summary page.

MERELY COMPLETING THE QUESTIONNAIRE will be a catalyst on many campuses to initiating a conversation about issues of general education. On the other hand, some respondents will be most interested in learning how others on their campus responded: the range of numbers assigned—from the lowest score to the highest score—and the mean score for each of the twenty-eight descriptive statements. The summary page has been provided for this purpose.

FOR MOST OF THE QUESTIONS, the higher the score the better. Nevertheless, it is important to note that for some questions a high score might not be the best score for an institution. General education programs must reflect each institution's unique history and traditions as well as the characteristics of its students.

STATEMENTS FOR WHICH THE RANGE—the difference between the lowest score and the highest score—is small are likely to be areas of agreement. Statements for which the range is large reveal either a lack of knowledge or diverse perspectives among the respondents, so discussion could be beneficial. It is important not to take any of the numbers too seriously—the numbers are not an end point, but merely a stimulus to spark conversation about issues of general education.

A LIST OF RESOURCES AND IDEAS for continuing the conversation accompanies this questionnaire.

ASSESSING GENERAL EDUCATION

Please respond to the following questions about your campus's general education program. Choose a number of points from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates agreement with the first statement and 5 indicates agreement with the second statement in each pair. Choose a number of points between 1 and 5 to indicate agreement with some aspects of both the first and the second statements.

---

1. Purpose

1 **2** **3** **4** **5**

Our general education program may be characterized by an absence of clarity about the purposes of the program, by the inclusion of too many purposes, or by too many compromises in the design of the program. (1 point)

The purposes of our general education program are explicit and clear both for the faculty and for the students. Our general education program is based on a coherent rationale and reflects the central educational values and commitments of our institution. (5 points)

---

2. Curriculum Committee

1 **2** **3** **4** **5**

Our general education curriculum committee suffers from the lack of a clear mission, chronic paralysis, and a sense of helplessness.

Our general education curriculum committee is the most intellectually exciting and challenging committee on our campus.

---

3. Goals

1 **2** **3** **4** **5**

Our general education program is expressed primarily as a list of courses that students must take.

Our general education program is expressed primarily as a set of goals for student learning and development.

---

4. Institutional Mission

1 **2** **3** **4** **5**

Our institutional mission statement provides no guidance in establishing priorities for undergraduate education.

Curriculum decisions are grounded in our institutional mission statement, our institution's unique history and traditions, and the characteristics of the students we serve.

5. Coherence

1	2	3	4	5
Students experience our general education program as fragmented. Separate courses and academic disciplines stress particular content and approaches. It's up to the students to search for commonalities and make connections.				Our general education program strives for a coherent educational experience through required core courses, interdisciplinary courses, capstone courses, emphasis on the acquisition of intellectual and communication skills, focus on the development of personal qualities in students, or similar means.

6. Student Understanding

1	2	3	4	5
Students are informed about our general education program primarily through our institution's academic catalog.				Students gain a good understanding of the rationale and structure of our general education program through freshman and transfer orientation, freshman seminars, meetings with advisors, brochures, workshops, peer advisement, or similar means.

7. Structure

1	2	3	4	5
Our general education program reflects a distribution structure. Students select courses from lists of diverse courses that fulfill requirements in various categories of knowledge.				Our general education program reflects a core curriculum structure. Commonality in the undergraduate experience is achieved by requiring students to complete many of the same courses. These courses have been designed to assure coherence and integration.

8. Values and Social Responsibility

1	2	3	4	5
Our general education program does not include political, moral, or ethical dimensions.				Our general education program includes political, moral, and ethical dimensions that are intended to prepare students to be reflective, critical, and engaged citizens.

9. Global Perspectives

1	2	3	4	5
Our general education program does not give special attention to international and global issues.				Our general education program recognizes the internationalization of America's interests and concerns and ensures that all students learn about other nations and cultures.

10. Multiculturalism

1	2	3	4	5
Our general education program has no multicultural or diversity component. The students receive a sufficient understanding through their study in depth of a single cultural tradition.				Our general education program recognizes the richness and changing composition of the United States, and ensures that all students learn about the diversity that exists within our own culture in terms of gender, race, ethnic background, class, age, and religion.

11. Student Experience

1	2	3	4	5
Our faculty members know little about the lives of students, and many students may feel that what happens in the classroom is not related to their lives outside the classroom.				Our general education program recognizes and takes seriously students' histories, ideas, attitudes, perceptions, and views of themselves and of the world. Students are helped in connecting what takes place in the classroom to their own lives.

12. Student Differences

1	2	3	4	5
The faculty who teach in our general education program consider their students to be similar and interchangeable. They strive to teach at a level that all these students can readily grasp.				The faculty who teach our general education courses are responsive to students at different levels of intellectual development, students with differential high school preparation, and students with different learning styles.

13. Articulation

1	2	3	4	5
No discussions have aimed to link the course requirements of our general education program with those of the institutions from which many of our transfer students come or the institutions to which many of our students transfer.				Articulation agreements ensure that students can transfer from another institution to ours or from our institution to another without any loss of credits or time because of general education requirements.

14. Continual Change

1	2	3	4	5
Our general education program was formulated, approved, and implemented several years ago. Since that time it has remained relatively static.				Our general education program is continually being improved in response to reactions of students, observations of faculty who teach in the program, periodic evaluations, and renewed visions of our institution's mission.

15. Faculty Experience

1	2	3	4	5
Many of the faculty who teach in our general education program have little or no understanding of the purpose of the curriculum and its rationale.				The faculty who teach in our general education program have a good understanding of the purpose of the curriculum and its rationale, and of the place their own courses hold within the curriculum. We ensure that faculty who are new to our institution are introduced to the purpose and rationale of the general education program.

16. Teaching

1	2	3	4	5
Faculty and department chairs regard teaching in our general education program primarily as a service to students majoring in other disciplines and as an academic chore or burden.				Faculty and department chairs regard teaching in our general education program as an opportunity for investigating new ways in which one's discipline can illuminate the problems and questions of our common life and an honor within the academic community.

17. Faculty–Student Interactions

1	2	3	4	5
The faculty and students in our general education program rarely interact outside the classroom.				Our general education program fosters close interactions between faculty and students, and frequent informal and extended conversations outside the classroom in hallways, offices, laboratories, computer rooms, and dining facilities are an invitation for students to join the intellectual community on our campus.

18. Faculty Community

1	2	3	4	5
At our institution each faculty member teaches his or her own general education courses with little or no consultation or dialogue with other faculty.				Our general education faculty interact across disciplinary lines in interdisciplinary curricular projects, team planning of course syllabi, revision of guidelines for requirements, and conversations about student development and intellectual issues.

19. Coordination

1	2	3	4	5
Our general education program exists primarily as a set of requirements and a list of course offerings in the catalog, along with staff who verify that students have fulfilled the requirements.				Our general education program has an administrator who coordinates the program, a faculty committee that considers changes and establishes policies, clear lines of responsibility and authority, and its own budget.

20. Support

1	2	3	4	5
Few on campus would care if our general education program were abolished.				Our general education program has strong support from many constituencies, including students, faculty members, department chairs, graduates, trustees, and employers of our students.

21. Image

1	2	3	4	5
The students regard our general education requirements as an obstacle that stands in the way of taking courses in their major department.				Our general education program is an important selling point in recruiting students, talking with students' parents and employers, and attracting contributions from our graduates.

22. Disciplinary Links

1	2	3	4	5
Our disciplinary major courses are not grounded in the coursework and perspectives that students encounter within our general education program.				Our general education courses provide an important foundation for the coursework and perspectives that students will encounter within their disciplinary major courses. Faculty who teach the disciplinary major courses are familiar with and build upon the content and perspectives provided in the general education courses.

23. Faculty Development

1	2	3	4	5
Support for faculty development related to general education is minimal at our institution.				The faculty who teach in our general education program have continuing and ample support for faculty development activities such as development of new courses, learning new course content, and acquiring new approaches to teaching and learning.

24. Improved Teaching

1	2	3	4	5
Student evaluations of teaching in general education courses are nonexistent or generally ignored.				Student evaluations of teaching are tied closely to our faculty development program. Course evaluation is viewed by the faculty as diagnostic. Following course evaluation, our faculty have immediate access to resources and opportunities to improve their teaching.

25. Co-Curricular Activities

1	2	3	4	5
Our general education program is focused exclusively on classroom teaching and learning.				Our general education program recognizes that valuable student learning can take place not only in the classroom but also in cafeterias, dormitories, student clubs, car pools, hallways, families, employment, and other settings.

26. Course Evaluation

1	2	3	4	5
Student course evaluation is an expectation, but does not occur in all courses.				Student course evaluations are important in deciding whether particular courses will be offered again and whether they will continue to satisfy general education requirements.

27. Assessment

1	2	3	4	5
Although individual courses may be evaluated by students, there is no evaluation of our general education program as a whole.				There is a continuing process of assessment of whether our general education program as a whole is achieving its purposes for students. The outcomes assessment takes many forms, such as instruments we have designed, exit interviews with graduating students, surveys of students who graduated several years earlier, examination of portfolios, and discussions with employers.

28. Quality

1	2	3	4	5
Our general education program satisfies the minimal accreditation requirements.				Our general education program surpasses in quality those of our peer institutions.

SUMMARY

	MY SCORE	LOWEST SCORE	MEAN SCORE	HIGHEST SCORE
1. Purpose				
2. Curriculum Committee				
3. Goals				
4. Institutional Mission				
5. Coherence				
6. Student Understanding				
7. Structure				
8. Values and Social Responsibility				
9. Global Perspectives				
10. Multiculturalism				
11. Student Experience				
12. Student Differences				
13. Articulation				
14. Continual Change				
15. Faculty Experience				
16. Teaching				
17. Faculty–Student Interactions				
18. Faculty Community				
19. Coordination				
20. Support				
21. Image				
22. Disciplinary Links				
23. Faculty Development				
24. Improved Teaching				
25. Co-Curricular Activities				
26. Course Evaluation				
27. Assessment				
28. Quality				
Total Score (from 28 to 140)				

ASSESSING GENERAL EDUCATION

AAC&U PUBLICATIONS

Integrity in the College Curriculum: A Report to the Academic Community (2nd ed.). 1990. 47 pages. ISBN 0-911696-49-0. *$10.*

Strong Foundations: Twelve Principles for Effective General Education Programs. 1994. 70 pages. ISBN 0-911696-62-8. *$18.*

Liberal Education. 1994. Vol. 80, No. 4 (summer). Special issue on integrity in the college curriculum. *$10.*

Current Issues in Liberal Education. 56 pages. *$9.95.*

A New Vitality in General Education: Planning, Teaching, and Supporting Effective Liberal Learning. 1988. 61 pages. ISBN 0-911696-41-5. *$12.*

SOURCES FOR CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

1. Purpose
Strong Foundations, pages 3–12
New Vitality, pages 3–10
Integrity, pages 1–7

2. Curriculum Committee
New Vitality, pages 3–10, 20–22, 49–52
Integrity, pages 9–14

3. Goals
Strong Foundations, pages 3–12
Integrity, pages 15–26
New Vitality, pages 3–20

4. Institutional Mission
Strong Foundations, pages 7–12
Current Issues, Chandler, "Higher Education in the 1990s," pages 5–7

5. Coherence
Strong Foundations, pages 12–17
Integrity, pages 15–26
New Vitality, pages 23–26

6. Student Understanding
Strong Foundations, pages 12–17, 31–33
New Vitality, pages 3–10

7. Structure
Strong Foundations, pages 12–17, 31–33
New Vitality, pages 3–10
Current Issues, Smith, "The Learning Community Model," pages 9–14

8. Values and Social Responsibility
Strong Foundations, pages 18–22
Integrity, pages 15–26

9. Global Perspectives
Strong Foundations, pages 18–22
Integrity, pages 22–23
New Vitality, pages 47–48
Current Issues, Schneider, "Engaging Cultural Legacies," pages 19–24
Current Issues, Howe and Takaki, "The Content of the Curriculum," pages 25–27
Current Issues, Keeton and James, "Becoming a Multicultural Institution," pages 29–32

10. Multiculturalism
Strong Foundations, pages 18–22
Integrity, pages 22–23
New Vitality, pages 47–48
Current Issues, Schneider, "Engaging Cultural Legacies," pages 19–24
Current Issues, Howe and Takaki, "The Content of the Curriculum," pages 25–27
Current Issues, Keeton and James, "Becoming a Multicultural Institution," pages 29–32

11. Student Experience
Strong Foundations, pages 22–26
New Vitality, pages 41–47
Current Issues, Gamson, "Confronting the Common Culture of Students," pages 15–17

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12. Student Differences
Strong Foundations, pages 15–17
New Vitality, pages 37–39
Current Issues, Clinchy, "On Critical Thinking and Connected Knowing," pages 37–42
Current Issues, Knefelkamp, "Seasons of Academic Life," pages 51–56

13. Articulation
Strong Foundations, pages 12–17, 22–26
Current Issues, Gamson, "Confronting the Common Culture of Students," pages 15–17

14. Continual Change
Strong Foundations, pages 26–30, 55–57
Current Issues, Chandler, "Higher Education in the 1990s," pages 5–7

15. Faculty Experience
Strong Foundations, pages 3–6, 26–30
Integrity, pages 9–14
New Vitality, pages 3–10

16. Teaching
Integrity, pages 35–39
Current Issues, Knefelkamp, "Seasons of Academic Life," pages 51–56

17. Faculty-Student Interactions
Strong Foundations, pages 31–36
New Vitality, pages 27–35, 41–47
Current Issues, Smith, "The Learning Community Model," pages 9–14
Current Issues, Knefelkamp, "Seasons of Academic Life," pages 51–56

18. Faculty Community
Strong Foundations, pages 31 to 36
New Vitality, pages 48 to 52
Integrity, pages 9 to 14
Current Issues, Smith, "The Learning Community Model," pages 9–14
Current Issues, Knefelkamp, "Seasons of Academic Life," pages 51–56

19. Coordination
Strong Foundations, pages 36–40
New Vitality, pages 55–56

20. Support
Strong Foundations, pages 40–44
Current Issues, Chandler, "Higher Education in the 1990s," pages 5–7

21. Image
Strong Foundations, pages 40–44
Integrity, pages 1–7

22. Disciplinary Links
Strong Foundations, pages 40–44
Integrity, pages 1–7

23. Faculty Development
Strong Foundations, pages 44–48
Integrity, pages 9–14, 35–39
Current Issues, Knefelkamp, "Seasons of Academic Life," pages 51–56

24. Improved Teaching
Strong Foundations, pages 44–48
New Vitality, pages 35–39
Integrity, pages 33–39

25. Co-Curricular Activities
Strong Foundations, pages 48–52
New Vitality, pages 41–47
Current Issues, Gamson, "Confronting the Common Culture of Students," pages 15–17

26. Course Evaluation
Strong Foundations, pages 52–54
New Vitality, pages 52–55
Integrity, pages 33–39

27. Assessment
Strong Foundations, pages 52–54
New Vitality, pages 52–55
Integrity, pages 33–34

28. Quality
Strong Foundations, pages 52–54
New Vitality, pages 52–55

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